



The Difficulty of Moral Choice: Zanussi's "Contract" and "The Constant Factor"

David Paul; Sylvia Glover

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DAVID PAUL and SYLVIA GLOVER

The Difficulty of Moral Choice: Zanussi's *Contract* and *The Constant Factor*

One of the unacknowledged ironies about Poland during the past decade and a half is that Krzysztof Zanussi's star rose simultaneously with that of Edward Gierek. One year after the release of Zanussi's first feature film, *The Structure of Crystals* (*Struktura kryształu*, 1969), Gierek became First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' (Communist) Party. There, however, the parallelism of these two careers ended. Gierek's rule, ushered in by violence in the Baltic shipyards, sputtered through ten years of intensifying economic and political problems before ending in disgrace amid the workers' movement of 1980. Meanwhile, Zanussi had been writing and directing films that, as the seventies wore on,

probed gradually more and more deeply into the moral fabric of the society underlying Gierek's regime. What Zanussi found there—corruption, disillusionment, and a generally confused set of public values—was subtly but startlingly depicted in his movies, particularly *Illumination* (*Iluminacja*, 1973) and *Camouflage* (*Barwy ochronne*, 1976).

In 1980, the year of Gierek's downfall and the abortive political "renewal," Zanussi completed two films that in many respects marked the culmination of his concern with the question of moral choice. *Contract* (*Kontrakt*), made for television and aired prior to the workers' strikes, hit hard at a theme the Solidarity unionists would later sound:

the conspicuous consumption of a “socialist bourgeoisie” grown fat on the backs of the working class. *The Constant Factor* (*Constans*), released in the heat of the “renewal” process, extended Zanussi’s focus to a broader sweep of philosophical questions, including the difficulty of constructing a morally consistent lifestyle within an immoral environment. Often correctly interpreted as criticisms of contemporary Poland,¹ the two films in fact beam their message to a far wider audience as well. At the risk of exaggerating their cultural significance, they might be seen together as a modern, secularized version of *Everyman*, for their lesson applies to all who would live rationally and virtuously.

On the surface, these films are vastly dissimilar. *Contract* is a comedy, albeit one with serious overtones, and its plot involves a dozen or so important characters. Both of these factors differentiate it from all previous Zanussi features as well as *The Constant Factor*. Up to the airing of *Contract*, Zanussi’s audiences had come to expect sober and reflective tales centering on one or two principal characters. None of the earlier films was completely lacking in humor, but Zanussi’s style—or so we thought—favored a dry, intellectual wit rather than the outrageous farcicality that characterizes *Contract*.

The setting of *Contract* is a misfired nuptial party. It is vaguely reminiscent of Robert Altman’s *A Wedding* (which, incidentally, Zanussi did not like but which he admits inspired *Contract*, in part). *Contract*’s characters are quite shallow-minded and preoccupied with games of self-indulgence. In contrast to other Zanussi films, this one offers a lot of madcap action bound to hold the attention of even the most lowbrow audience:

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a bride who says “*nie*” (no) at the altar and runs out of the church, a band of young ballet dancers cavorting naked in the sauna and the snow, a mysterious series of thefts among the carefully chosen wedding guests, and a spectacular house fire set by the drunken and deranged groom.

In a sense, *Contract* seems to have heralded a new phase in Zanussi’s creative ambitions. Though not his first television movie, it reaches out to a wider audience than his earlier media efforts (among them: *Face to Face*, 1968; *Behind the Wall*, 1971; and the West German production *Wege in der Nacht*, 1979). With its surface lightness and an international cast that includes a fine performance by Leslie Caron, *Contract* reflects Zanussi’s outward-looking artistic aspirations in the eighties. It announces the director’s effort to cater more directly to the mass international audience. Zanussi himself guessed in 1980 that, for him, international coproductions were the wave of the future, and he has ever since been more active outside Poland than within. He has completed a film based on the life of Pope John Paul II, produced by CBS and the Italian RAI, and he has been involved in several more projects involving French and West German companies.²

The Constant Factor, on the other hand, is more in tune with the earlier Zanussi. It focuses on one main protagonist and his efforts to make his way through a frustrating world. Stylistically, *The Constant Factor* more closely resembles Zanussi’s films of the seventies, in which the director relied heavily on dialogue and pictorial symbolism to hold together a slow-paced plot. There is some action and even a touch of violence, but these elements are reserved for special moments, understated, and employed pointedly to confirm the intellectual argument running through the center of the film. It is a thinking person’s film in the finest Zanussi mold, challenging its viewers to reconsider their notions of right and wrong. *The Constant Factor* is a morality play, but not one in the tritely “moralistic” sense, for it takes a few complicated twists that illuminate the complexity of moral choices in modern life.

Is it possible to live a life of moral consistency? This question is asked in nearly all of

Dorota
(Maya
Komorowska),
Penelope
(Leslie
Caron),
Piotr
(Krzysztof
Kolberger):
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Zanussi's films. Zanussi often juxtaposes contrasting character types between or among whose lifestyles we might hope to choose. In *Camouflage*, for example, the two protagonists are a middle-aged docent whose cynicism is appalling but, alas, disquietingly persuasive, and a young magister whose strong sense of scholarly integrity is put to the test and found tragically unfitted to the jungle of academia. In *The Constant Factor*, a virtuous young man named Witek faces virtually an entire world of scoundrels. Occupying a privileged position in the glamorous field of international trade, Witek hews to a simon-pure business ethic while his colleagues and bosses casually pad their expense accounts and sell uninventoried state equipment for personal gain. Witek does not blow the whistle on them, but by simply not playing their game he jeopardizes it and brings their enmity down upon himself. It quickly becomes obvious that he cannot survive in their world.

Zanussi's young protagonist, played by Tadeusz Bradecki, effectively compels our empathy. If we are tempted to identify with him completely, however, we are sharply reminded that the choices are not easy. Witek does not fully recognize the constraints under which he must function; he must learn that in his world, the supreme purpose is to survive among fellow creatures who conceal their

predatory natures beneath civilized mannerisms (a lesson that continues the central point of *Camouflage*). Nor is it clear that Witek knows exactly what he wants, and the constant factor that he hopes will guide his behavior turns out to be an elusive abstraction.

Little by little, Witek gets caught up in a superhuman quest to understand the meaning of life enroute to an inevitable death. He turns eventually to mathematics, much as Franciszek in *Illumination* placed his faith in physics, but learns that no equation will comprehend all the perplexing experiences that make up his world—his father's accidental death on a Himalayan expedition, his mother's agonizing death by cancer, a small child's death that he himself inadvertently causes, and other mysteries in the bewildering life Witek lives amidst all these reminders of his own ultimate fate.

Witek's world is thus hopelessly complex and confusing. *The Constant Factor* is an ambitious film that plunges into several big issues at once. It is about life and death, honesty and corruption, personal happiness and social responsibility. Having taken on such a weighty chunk of material, Zanussi at times evidences some of his characters' difficulties, and the subject matter almost gets out of hand. The film is not as smoothly crafted as *Camouflage*, a seamless movie that

deals with a more limited set of philosophical questions.

The Constant Factor is nevertheless a worthy offering from this brainy auteur (who always writes his own scripts), and Zanussi never quite loses his control despite the complexity of the subject matter. To manage his material, Zanussi calls upon an impressive array of stylistic tricks. Death and fascination with death are portrayed through vivid close-ups. We become more than just witnesses as Witek's mother slowly loses her life. The cremation of a Hindu woman, filmed in India, reveals how rituals feed our fascination with death. Back among the living, we see the marginality of the individual who would swim against the powerful stream of human corruption, for at critical moments Witek is shown at the edge of the frame in isolation from his co-workers. Witek's peers wreak a sickening vengeance on him by hiding contraband foreign currency in his belongings as he passes through customs; when he is caught, we share his palpable claustrophobia as the customs officer backs him menacingly into the corner of a narrow room.

The antagonistic natural world, too, seems to design its specific torments for Witek. Repeatedly, the camera makes long pans through the Himalayas, peaks whose majesty and treachery symbolize elements of allure, challenge, power, serenity, and death so intertwined in Witek's psyche that they cannot be untangled. As Witek's personal and professional life deteriorates, we see numerous short takes of increasing rapidity indicating that he cannot reconcile himself to the cruelties of the natural world, which are recreated in the social world of his work. Quick cuts connect Witek's workplace, the hospital where his



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mother is suffering, the church where Witek unsuccessfully seeks solace, and the mourning room in which his now-deceased mother reposes. We sense that Witek is losing control, an impression that is confirmed when he admits to a close friend that he feels he has "come unstuck."

Zanussi also makes startling use of light and color tone to bring out the ironies of Witek's personal journey. The most important moments are bathed in luminosity. All of the unfortunate events that befall Witek take place in cheerful sunlight or under more-than-adequate interior lighting: his troubles on the job, his arrest at the airport, the accidental death of the child playing beneath his scaffold. The decline and death of Witek's mother are garishly illuminated, and the symbolically destructive mountains which killed his father and hold the lure of death for Witek himself are shown in a dazzling glare. Much of the film is shot during wintertime, on sunny days against bright snow. The ironic effect of all this light enveloping "dark" events is to draw us into the protagonist's own confusion. How are we to know right from wrong, enlightenment from benightedness?

In Zanussi films, no judgment is simple. Characters are never as uncomplicated as they seem at first, and their dilemmas cannot be resolved by a sheer act of will power. Witek takes up where earlier Zanussi protagonists left off—Jaroslaw in *Camouflage*, Franciszek in *Illumination*, Marta in *Quarterly Balance* (*Bilans kwartalny*, 1974), Jan in *The Structure of Crystals*—but, like them, he fails to achieve a happy balance. The young men's *Angst* (and that of Marta in *Quarterly Balance*) may or may not give way to the corruption, conformity, and survivalism of those around

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them. We in the audience are left uneasy, yearning for a Hollywood ending that would dissolve the ambiguity and send us home knowing that all—or at least some—lived happily ever after. Such an ending would be wholly out of character for Krzysztof Zanussi. And that brings us to *Contract*, a funny movie with an unfunny conclusion.

Contract shows some signs of its having been made for television. Compared to *The Constant Factor* and earlier Zanussi films, the didacticism is much more subtle, the moral lesson more cleverly driven home. The pace of *Contract* is relatively fast. It was consciously designed to capture a large but atomized audience of people watching in their own living rooms, in competition with all the normal distractions of home and family.

Yet it is an artful film that rewards careful attention. Typically, Zanussi has framed his scenes with great care. The characters are rarely alone, and crowded frames tell us that we are watching a study of cosmopolitan group behavior. When we do see people alone, we are alerted that something quite significant is happening. The major themes, however, are developed through the composition of the crowded frames. Older and younger generations are frequently shown in close interaction, illustrating the fact that their values and lifestyles overlap more than they conflict. Despite apparent differences, real conflicts of ethical standards do not correlate with generational identity except for the case of the aged nanny who senses that her traditional values are out of place. The other two generations are much closer to each other than any would like to admit; whether shown together or separate, the young display the same propensities to status-seeking and influence-buying as their parents.

The wedding that forms the center of the plot is a comically mixed-up affair. In the first place, true to the conventions of their generation, the bride (Lilka) and groom (Piotr) have been living together for some time already. Lilka's desire to stay in touch with tradition drives her to pull the reluctant Piotr before a priest to arrange for a church ceremony following the civil ceremony. Thus, when Lilka runs out in the middle of their religious rites, she does so as a woman already lawfully wed. The guests, in some confusion as to



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whether or not the marriage had actually taken place, quickly overcome their discomfort and settle into the serious frivolities of the reception.

The post-nuptial party takes place at the sumptuous villa of the groom's father, a physician enriched by private fees illegally collected from his choice patients. It is no match for the legendarily festive three-day Polish traditional weddings like that depicted in Andrzej Wajda's *The Wedding (Wesele, 1972)*, but what it lacks in exuberance it makes up for in ostentation. The guests include Lilka's grumpy father, another member of the semilegitimately *nouveau riche*, who not only disliked the idea of a church wedding from the start but seems generally envious of Piotr's higher-status father. Others in the assembled party include Piotr's forlorn mother and his younger stepmother; a snooty foreign aunt named Penelope (played by Caron) who was once a renowned ballerina, and her snotty postpubescent daughter Patricia (Christine Paul-Podleski); a Polish step-aunt who is having an affair with a married Swede; and the previously mentioned dancers from the local ballet company. On the margins of this throng are the disapproving old nanny and a slovenly housemaid.

In the midst of the celebration, guests notice that their valuables have been stolen. The thefts are tracked to the embarrassed Penelope, whose carefully practiced hauteur is destroyed by the revelation of her kleptomania. At almost the same moment, Patricia is discovered in the bathtub with a fellow she picked up downtown. Later, the party takes a recess and goes for a merry sleighride, returning only to find that the abandoned

bridegroom has turned into a raving pyromaniac. Luckily, the fire is confined to the kitchen. With great dispatch, Piotr is confined to the wagon that will carry him off to an institution. As he is hauled off, Lilka at last returns, wandering without a coat through the snow. In the final scenes she is comforted, sort of, by the only member of the middle-aged set who has appeared composed and caring throughout the whole affair, Piotr's stepmother Dorota (Maja Komorowska). The film ends with the two women walking through the quiet woods and suddenly viewing a large stag, a magnificent symbol of serenity in a world quite apart from the cacophonous frippery of human society.

Zanussi's role as social critic thus asserts itself in this amusing farce. At the heart of *Contract* is the same serious theme that the director explored more openly in his earlier movies: moral decision-making. In *Contract*, an entire community of people displays its confusion about morality, yet the group ultimately breaks down into individuals who do have some moral sensitivity.

At least, some of them do. And for them, moral decision-making must be done alone, for the crowd will not permit or respect the act. Piotr is perhaps the most confused of all. Heretofore, he has made a big show of disdain for his father's privileged status, but he drives Lilka away by reversing his position and deciding to accept his father's help in securing their future. Lilka's flight, however, drives him to despair and, bewildered, he lashes out by himself at the most tangible symbol of his society's confused values: his father's house.

Others who confront moral issues similarly do so in isolation. Penelope, in shame following the discovery of her thefts, removes herself and her guilt to the bathroom. The nanny, offended to tears by all the goings-on, recognizes her isolation from these people and goes through the motions of moving out (though we see her later, lurking around just outside).

Lilka's act of rebellion before the altar is another lonely moment of decision. Misgivings well up within her, triggered no doubt by Piotr's moral turnabout. This is her last chance to break away from all the hypocrisy and rethink her life. Thus driven by her conscience from the confused society around her, she takes off by herself and is not seen again



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until the end of the story.

When Lilka finally straggles back and then goes off into the woods with Dorota, the film abruptly leaves human society behind and enters the world of nature. And here is where one of Zanussi's favorite leitmotifs comes to the forefront of this grand farce. Nature is symbolically important in Zanussi's films. It is often depicted romantically as the place where purity, goodness, and strength reside. However, it can also be deadly, as in *The Constant Factor*. It is seductively beautiful and thrilling, but it is mystifying. The mountains that swallowed up Witek's father are awe-inspiring, and they contain within them an inexpressible truth about Witek's destiny.

Contract begins and ends with scenes thrusting humans awkwardly into nature. In the opening scene, the old nanny is out feeding semi-wild animals in the snow when along comes a noisy party of horseback riders. The wild animals are frightened off: people who are preoccupied with their own "civilized" self-indulgence have spoiled the day for that poor old obsolete soul who was simply trying to make contact with nature. From here, we are taken immediately into the disorderly environment of the human beings, where we remain until the final scene. The only other references to the animal world are shots of the family dogs and one glimpse of a pathetic deer confined unnaturally on the grounds of the villa.

At the finale, Lilka and Dorota are filled with wonder at the sight of the stag in the forest, and they are staring at it in silence as the screen goes dark. The stag, a simple and gentle beast, offers an example of life removed from pettiness and wasteful extravagance. The effect of this scene is breathtaking, and

it puts the movie into a perfect symmetry as the endless folly of the humanfolk is framed between two idyllic references to the wild.

Nature thus provides an alternative world from which humans might draw some lessons about how to live. They do not, however; or when they do, they draw lessons that are not especially helpful or elevating (for example, Jakub in *Camouflage*, who misuses nature to document his Social Darwinist philosophy). More often than not, humans' interaction with nature results in tremendous mischief.

Nature has a way of playing tricks on those who would bring it under their control. Witek never makes it to the Himalayas by the end of *The Constant Factor*, but he ends up working on a scaffold which must now take the place of the natural heights to which he aspires. It is here that the natural force of gravity guides the heavy chunk of masonry his pick has dislodged, downward onto the little child below. Analogously, *Contract*'s Piotr unleashes the natural energy of fire but does not thereby end his agony. Rather, he gets himself committed to an asylum, with safe transit guaranteed by Daddy's cash.

Distanced from nature, men design games that in many ways define their very humanness but also complicate their survival by rendering their competitions with each other hard to predict. *The Constant Factor* is full of references to games—literal games such as darts, dice, slot machines, and roulette, and figurative games in which Witek takes on the overwhelming opposition represented by public depravity and private mortality. Witek's games challenge fate, and so do those played by Piotr, Lilka, and Penelope in *Contract*. Then there are society's games, the most prominent form of play featured in *Contract*: social climbing, ostentation, one-upsmanship. We hear an allusion to political games in a conversation between the fathers of the bride and groom, who discover they have more in common than they had imagined: "Democracy is all very well, but somebody has to run things."

The gameplaying clues us in to the complexity of the films' characters, and to the ambiguity of the moral questions they confront. Piotr and Lilka are not really so far removed from the corruption of their fathers. In making arrangements with a young priest about

the church wedding, Lilka is perfectly willing to fudge the truth about the nature of the marriage that will supposedly result from the sacred rites, whereas Piotr can hardly be restrained from blurting out the truth: that they plan to have no children, intend to practice birth control in ways unsanctioned by the church, and so on. Yet it is Piotr who shows his corruptibility later, for he finds the power of his father's social influence irresistible; if Piotr is to have a lucrative career and the newlyweds a private apartment, he must rely on his father's connections. Thus is Lilka persuaded, in a belated role reversal, to rebel against the hypocrisy that has crept into their vulnerable young lives.

Witek is Zanussi's most heartbreaking example of a young idealist whose genuine desire to live a moral life is repeatedly frustrated. *The Constant Factor* is a sobering tribute to the obduracy of our environment, for Witek, having lost his cushy job in international marketing, is sentenced to menial labor. In the film's final irony, even this forced retreat into what seems an ethically neutral job does not save him from responsibility, as he learns when he becomes the cause of an innocent child's death. But wait a minute—was Witek himself so perfect? Did he not, earlier in the story, get that first job through connections arranged by the mountaineering buddies of his deceased father? That such behavior is commonplace does not exempt it from a rather harsh judgment if we apply Witek's uncompromising standards. Once again, Zanussi has left us with unanswered questions.

Late in the game, a humbled Witek is taught an enigmatic lesson by a wise mathematics professor: there may exist a simple equation which leads to a superficially correct solution, but if the problem contains a large number of variables, the simple solution will not suffice. Mathematics, Witek learns, offers certain more elegant equations to solve complex problems—but life does not necessarily follow the rules of mathematics, and the abstract principles governing the science of numbers cannot free human beings from the awesome responsibility of making nonquantifiable decisions.

What *The Constant Factor* does by centering on one character, *Contract* does with a

scatter-gun approach. In *Contract*, the human variables are obviously too numerous to be comprehended by any abstract equations, and searching for a constant factor is irrelevant. Piotr and Lilka cannot be consistent in their repudiation of social conventions. The symbolic breakup of their fresh young marriage reveals problems in the broader community, and we see these problems acted out in the behavior of the wedding guests.

Affluence does not protect the rich against emotional hardship. Corruption breeds itself into acceptability and becomes perversely normative. To deal with the resulting moral chaos, people play games that grow ever more intricate. Thus, the wedding guests think nothing of black marketeering and influence peddling, they scarcely discriminate between the innocent nudity of the ballet troupe and the promiscuity of Patricia, and they accept the scandalous behavior of Penelope as an expected quirk on the part of a stupid foreigner. Completely forgotten is the wedding, the contract, that brought them together for all their carryings-on. When the bride and groom eventually make their separate returns to the group, their unhappy reappearance is quite out of place; it disturbs the fun of the party—though, it is implied, only momentarily. The unfunny ending thus brings the central message of *Contract* into focus, linking this comic farce with Zanussi's more "serious" films.

Zanussi's reputation now reaches far beyond the borders of Poland. This by no means diminishes his special role as a critic of his own society.³ In *Contract*, he unmasks the injustice and hypocrisy attending private wealth within a supposedly collectivistic-egalitarian community. In *The Constant Factor*, the instances of corruption and greed that are depicted are quite specific to Eastern Europe: even physicians, poorly salaried in comparison to their Western counterparts, expect illegal payoffs in return for decent care. Yet it takes no great stretching of the Western viewer's imagination to relate to Zanussi's scenarios. We, too, are greedy, obsessed by our positions on the social ladder, fascinated and horrified by death, and awash in a sea of moral uncertainty. Like his more famous countryman Wajda, Zanussi has plumbed the

specific realities of Polish culture and, in so doing, shown us something profound about ourselves.⁴

Disturbingly, Zanussi questions the notions of personal efficacy by which most of us live. We believe that meaningful choices about life can and must be made, and we would like to think that our own choices can be at once moral and functional. Above all, we do not like to think that we cannot really chart our own course, distinguishing for ourselves right and wrong, truth and falsehood. In an unusual interview contained within the movie of another Polish director, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979), Zanussi expressed his concern about how hard it is for an honest man to make his way through a world in which there might not be any ascertainable objective truths. Zanussi's anxious young men and women confuse themselves, sometimes irremediably, by assuming they can comprehend the incomprehensible.

Perhaps the defining comment of Zanussi's work is that a virtuous and satisfying life is difficult to construct and, once put together, fragile. Witek, Piotr, and Lilka try to base their behavior on a principle, but their solutions turn out to be simplistic and dysfunctional amidst the complexity of natural processes.

We can only guess at the direction of natural processes, but if we are to preserve those crucial elements that distinguish us as human, we dare not give up hope of controlling our own choices. The dilemmas remain, fraught with contradictions: can we compromise in order to survive and yet maintain a semblance of morality? or, to turn that around, can we consciously build a personal moral structure without destroying that structure through the public compromises we are forced to make? Life may appear to be a no-win game complicated by subconscious motives and environmental constraints; but humans, perhaps through some instinctual urge just as strong as survival, must still make enlightened decisions about how to live. It is Zanussi, more than anyone else in the contemporary Polish cinema, who delineates the contours of these human choices.

NOTES

1. One of the present authors attended the opening of *The Constant Factor* in Cracow in September, 1980. At that time of

political upheaval and social introspection, Zanussi's Polish audience responded to the film with an outpouring of enthusiasm.

2. See J.R. Keith Keller's interview with Zanussi in *Variety*, vol. 300 no. 7 (September 17, 1980), p. 50.

3. Nor has this role been without its dangers in Communist-ruled Poland. *Camouflage* was officially criticized soon after its release, and Zanussi was harassed during several public appearances in

which he discussed the film with his audience.

4. For a brilliant discussion of Wajda and his intimate connections to Polish culture, see Boleslaw Michalek, "Andrzej Wajda's Vision of One Country's Past and Present," in *Politics, Art and Commitment in The East European Cinema*, ed. David W. Paul (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 169-88.

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Andrzej Wajda's Reign of Terror: Danton's Polish Ambiance

Andrzej Wajda, almost from the beginning of his long film and theater career, has found himself on the periphery of ideology and the center of political controversy. This intransigence, which always irked the Polish communist leaders, Gomułka, Gierek, Kania, and now General Jaruzelski, has earned Wajda the title of popular spokesman for the Polish national conscience. In the words of Polish actor Andrzej Seweryn: "Wojtyła, Wałęsa, Wajda, that would be, the Pope, Saint Peter and Saint Paul." *Danton*, Wajda's first film made after the imposition of the martial law

in Poland, widely promoted by the French Ministry of Culture, has now perplexed the French left. In fact, Wajda's *Danton* was this year's most controversial film in Paris, awarded the Prix Delluc as well as a César (French Oscar) for best director. Unlike *Man of Iron*, shot in *cinéma vérité* style and celebrating the triumph of Solidarity, *Danton* does not let history speak for itself but dramatizes it. Wajda forces us to look closely at the human consequences of ideological decisions.

The French reaction to *Danton* contrasts with the film's muted reception in Poland.

Depardieu as Danton, hailed by his followers after a speech

